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ABSTRACT

Sophisticated public relations is being practiced in the Middle East. However, the models used in that region are not identical to American models, nor are they identical to those in other Western countries usually considered part of the "First World." In particular, Moslem culture heavily influences Middle East practice. Can the ethics of public relations be universal or must they remain culturally specific and ideologically based, suggesting an argument for ethical relativism? It could be argued that definition and articulation of ethics are, in fact, irrelevant in an "excellent" two-way symmetrical model. Because this model is inherently ethical, codified parameters are superfluous. Ethics may be critically important to police the inherently unethical asymmetrical models of public relations because such ethics establish boundaries beyond which the practice of these models should not transcend. While many of the values of the Middle East culture are non-Western--press freedoms are limited, for instance--nothing inherently precludes the practice of a "symmetrical" model of public relations. Further, nothing precludes the Middle East's public relations system from being ethical by "First World" standards. Middle East scholars suggest that public relations ethical standards in their region extend back some 1,200 years in Arab culture, to the time of Mohammed. (Includes 20 notes.) (TB)

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"A Global Perspective on Public Relations Ethics: The Middle East"

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INTRODUCTION

Sophisticated public relations is being practiced in the Middle East. However, the models used in that region are not identical to U. S. models, nor to those in other Western countries usually considered part of the "First World." In particular, Moslem culture heavily influences Middle East practice. This paper examines Middle East public relations, factoring in its Moslem influence, and compares its ethical dimensions to those that are espoused in the "First World."

CAN PUBLIC RELATIONS ETHICS BE UNIVERSAL?

Said comparisons beg larger questions, i.e., "Can 'universal' *theories* be applied to public relations, and--if so--whose theories?" The corollary question that this paper primarily addresses is, "Can public relations ethics be universal?" Or, must they remain culturally specific and ideologically based--suggesting an argument for ethical "relativism"? Such questions become particularly germane when considering "Third World" countries in which both the use and the control of mass media may be far different from in democratic "First World" nations. Thereby, in many "Third World" nation-states, public relations practitioners' use of such media is viewed differently. Even the efficacy of public relations practice may be suspect within indigenous "Third World" cultures. Al-Enad reports that public relations practice has been used and sometimes has been exploited by governments and private institutions in "Third World" nations. He asks whether public relations practice is even needed in such countries, contending that a positive response could be naive:

> ... (F)orces behind the evolution of public relations in Western societies such as developments in technology, growth of the middle class, improvement in education and growth of large-scale business, government, and organized labor are not always found in developing countries.
>
> ... "The public be damned" is an authoritative living rule in many places. And finally, the mass media are not numerous, and mass communication is not sophisticated enough. In societies where these conditions exist, why is public relations needed? If business institutions felt the need for public relations, ... what conditions are organizations in the third world supposed to react to?

Al-Enad asks whether government institutions in authoritative societies actually care about public opinion? While conceding public relations' value in "Third World" nations, El-Enad posits that it has a different role than in Western society. He observes that Western public relations literature places public relations between an institution and its publics or its environment. However, he contends:

> ... in developing nations it is located between the material and the nonmaterial aspects of the culture. It functions in the same manner; it tries to adapt each side to the needs and expectations of the other. In both cases, its role may not meet the standards as stated by public relations theoreticians. But playing it does help in maintaining the equilibrium of the system.[1]

A fundamental consideration in the application of "First World" public relations theories and techniques must be "Third World" countries' indigenous cultures. Just as Western public relations practitioners must consider diverse publics in their own increasingly multicultural nations, they face an extreme range of cultures when they practice beyond their borders. Starck and Kruckeberg perhaps cite the ultimate question when they inquire: Is it even possible to know another culture?[2]

Intuitively, one would posit that different cultures and different social/political/economic systems would require different public relations theories and practice with a corresponding need for different ethics--suggesting an argument for ethical "relativism" that is based on culture. Sriramesh and White lend credence to this assumption when they argue that cultural distinctions among societies must affect the way public relations is practiced within those societies.[3] They say scholars should question whether Western theories are comprehensive enough to explain public relations activities worldwide. They urge scholars:

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[1] Abdulrahman H. Al-Enad, "Public Relations' Roles in Developing Countries," *Public Relations Quarterly*, Spring 1990, 24-26.

[2] Kenneth Starck and Dean Kruckeberg, "Mass Communication Education and the International Challenge," *Phi Beta Delta International Review*, Fall 1991, 25.

[3] K. Sriramesh and Jon White, "Societal Culture and Public Relations," in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* , ed. James E. Grunig (Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1992), 597.

> ... to highlight not only the inconsistencies of Western theories and techniques but also to assess the applicability of limitations of these theories in cross-cultural settings.[4]

After reviewing the literature of cultural anthropology and organizational dynamics, the two public relations scholars conclude:

> We are in strong agreement with the advocates of the culture-specific approach and contend that organizations are affected by culture. We draw a relationship between culture and public relations by first linking culture with communication. We argue that the linkages between culture and communication and culture and public relations are parallel because public relations is primarily a communication activity.[5]

They further hypothesize that:

> ... societies with greater power distance in relationships also will tend to be more elitist and therefore harbor asymmetrical worldviews. Consequently, public relations practitioners operating in these societies will tend to practice the one-way press agentry model of pubic relations .... Managers in these cultures also may be more prone to viewing the organization as a closed system that should only disseminate information without assimilating any from its environment.[6]

Implicit in Sriramesh and White's arguments is a suggested cultural "relativism" in establishing appropriate professional ethics. However, in their advocacy of "excellent" public relations, they seem to desire "universalism" in the application of a "two-way symmetrical" model. "Excellent" public relations demands "symmetrical" practice that has corresponding ethical assumptions. Grunig and White explain that a two-way symmetrical model uses research and dialogue to manage conflict, to improve understanding and to build relationships with publics. Furthermore, both the organization and its publics can be persuaded by the other; as a result, both may change their behavior.[7]

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[4] Ibid., 599.

[5] Ibid., 609.

[6] Ibid., 610.

[7] James E. Grunig and Jon White, "The Effect of Worldviews on Public Relations Theory and Practice," in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, 39.

Although Grunig acknowledges that most "excellent" public relations departments do not practice a "pure" symmetrical model, he argues that they serve as advocates for strategic publics as well as for their organizations. Thereby, "excellent" public relations practice is a mixture of a two-way symmetrical and a two-way asymmetrical model, i.e., a *mixed-motive* model. However, Grunig cautions that a mixed-motive model is more symmetrical than asymmetrical.[8]

Thus, Grunig argues that public relations should be practiced to serve the public interest, to develop mutual understanding between organizations and their publics and to contribute to informed debate about issues in society.[9] Grunig and Grunig are quick to point out that the two-way symmetrical model avoids the problem of ethical "relativism" because it defines ethics as a *process* of public relations rather than as an *outcome*. That is, Grunig and Grunig say that the professional practice of symmetrical public relations provides a forum for dialogue, discussion and discourse on issues for which people of different values generally come to different conclusions.[10]

In contrast, stringent adherence to ethics is not to be assumed in the practice of asymmetrical public relations, because ethical conduct is hardly inherent. Dozier cautions that there is an important ethical distinction between "asymmetrical" and "symmetrical" models, even if an asymmetrical model is "two-way." He observes that a two-way "asymmetrical" model and a two-way symmetrical model have different goals. Simply, organizations practicing persuasive "asymmetrical" public relations seek environmental domination, whereas organizations embracing the two-way "symmetrical model" seek cooperation.[11]

Neither do Grunig and White offer optimism about the likelihood for ethical practitioner conduct using asymmetrical models, observing that an asymmetrical *worldview*:

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[8]James E. Grunig, "Communication, Public Relations, and Effective Organizations: An Overview of the Book," in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, 18-19.

[9]Ibid., 9-10.

[10]James E. Grunig and Larissa A. Grunig, "Models of Public Relations and Communication," in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, 308.

[11]David M. Dozier, "The Organizational Roles of Communications and Public Relations Practitioners," in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, 346.

> ... steers public relations practitioners toward actions that are unethical, socially irresponsible, and ineffective. ... (P)ractitioners with an asymmetrical worldview presuppose that the organization knows best and that publics benefit from "cooperating" with it. Asymmetrical practitioners with a social conscience ... sometimes convince themselves that they are manipulating publics for the benefit of those publics ....

They conclude:

> ... (I)n spite of the good intentions of practitioners--it is difficult, if not impossible, to practice public relations in a way that is ethical and socially responsible using an asymmetrical model.[12]

ETHICS DO NOT APPLY TO AN 'EXCELLENT' MODEL

One could argue that definition and articulation of ethics are, in fact, irrelevant in an "excellent" two-way symmetrical model; because this model is inherently ethical, codified parameters are superfluous. Ethics are critically important to police the inherently unethical "asymmetrical" models of public relations because such ethics establish boundaries beyond which the practice of these models should not transcend. Such ethics' codified articulation, albeit always inadequate, must be deemed essential in the practice of asymmetrical models of public relations to attempt to restrict both the opportunities and the tendencies for professional malfeasance.[13]

In contrast, application of an "excellent" two-way symmetrical model more specifically calls for definition and clarification of values, belief systems and ideologies. In asymmetrical models, base values may be implicit in the articulation of codes of ethics. However, a significant difference exists between asymmetrical and symmetrical models: in the inherently unethical asymmetrical models, ethics and their articulation are of primary importance; in symmetrical models, the values, themselves, and their clarification are of primary importance in a pro-active effort toward symmetrical relationship-building.

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[12]James E. Grunig and Jon White, "The Effect of Worldviews on Public Relations Theory and Practice," in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, 40.

[13]For a complete description of this argument, see Dean Kruckeberg, "Public Relations as Ideology," Paper presented at the annual convention of the Eastern Communication Association, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 27-30 April 1995.

Thus, "excellent" two-way symmetrical public relations is inherently ethical; it needs no codified expression of articulated ethics. Somewhat analogous to New Testament Christian writings in which believers no longer felt condemned and--in that sense--bound by Old Testament law, a symmetrical model of public relations is not bound by ethics.

Rather, the articulation and operationalization of the values, themselves, are of primary importance. A symmetrical model of public relations is highly value-laden, as Grunig and White suggest in their description of "ethical" organizations that build symmetrical, mutually beneficial relationships:

> ... (A)n excellent worldview for public relations ... should be *ethical* in that it helps organizations build caring--even loving--*relationships* with other individuals and groups they affect in a society or the world.[14]

Thus, some interesting observations can be made in light of Sriramesh and White's propositions linking societal culture and public relations:

> *Proposition 1:* Societal cultures that display lower levels of power distance, authoritarianism, and individualism, but have higher levels of interpersonal trust among workers, are most likely to develop the excellent pubic relations practices identified in this book.
>
> *Proposition 2:* Although such occurrences are rare, organizations that exist in societal cultures that do not display these characteristics conducive to the spawning of excellent public relations programs also may have excellent public relations programs if the few power holders of the organization have individual personalities that foster participative organizational culture even if this culture is atypical to mainstream societal culture.[15]

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[14]James E. Grunig and Jon White, "The Effect of Worldviews on Public Relations Theory and Practice," in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, 38.

[15]K. Sriramesh and Jon White, "Societal Culture and Public Relations," in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* , 612.

On the hand, the presumption is made that the only "ethical" public relations embraces a two-way symmetrical model that, in fact, is highly value-laden and inherently requires no articulation of ethics, either through codification or through other expression. Its practice requires definition and clarification of values, belief systems and ideologies, but these are always open to examination and redefinition. Indeed, in an "excellent" two-way symmetrical model, there is an explicit responsibility to constantly challenge these values, belief systems and ideologies.

However, a strong counterthesis by El-Enad, which is implicitly endorsed by Sriramesh and White, contends that public relations is culturally relative in its theories and its techniques--inferring a range of acceptable asymmetrical models may be most appropriate for a given culture and its social/political/economic system. It reasonably follows that a cultural relativism capable of embracing a range of public relations models would require a like "relativism" in the consideration of professional public relations ethics.

From the former supposition, one could conclude that any dogmatic entity that is unyielding in its fundamental positions would not be able to practice the "excellent" two-way symmetrical public relations that is deemed the only model allowing ethical practice. Such would seem the case for many religious and political bodies that seek environmental domination. From the second argument, one could conclude that such ethics would be subject to a cultural relativism that could be further impacted by social/political/economic systems

SUCH PARADOX WOULD SEEM PROBLEMATIC IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Such paradox would seem especially problematic in the Middle East, a geopolitical region that is paradoxical in many ways. Upon first consideration, the Middle East might be perceived by most U. S.-based public relations scholars and practitioners as a "Third World" region significantly different from the West in its culture--to the point where corresponding public relations ethics likewise would be substantively different from those embraced in Western "First World" countries. However, at least some of these assumptions might be gross misperceptions. In many respects, especially in regard to their technology, many Middle East countries have a "First-World" economic vitality and accompanying infrastructure. Oil and other revenues have been used to rapidly develop several of the countries to "First World" levels. Robison observes:

> Over the last 25 or 30 years the Gulf countries have experienced a degree of development which the West eased itself through over a period of nearly two centuries.[16]

To be examined more closely, however, is the predominant influence of Islam, which is the belief that there is only one God and that it is the people's duty to believe in Him and to serve Him in the manner which He laid out in the Koran.[17] Islam is the state-sanctioned religion in many Middle East countries, and its influence is far greater within Middle East social fabric than any like influence of Judeo-Christian religions that predominate throughout much of the "First World." While most of the "First World" is highly secular, life in virtually all Middle East countries revolves around religion.

Some Middle East scholars make a compelling argument that the evolution of public relations practice in Arab culture extends back 1,200 years, certainly to the time of Mohammed! Public relations ethics and law are to be considered in the context of Islamic ethical theory and Arabic law.[18]

One Middle East University that was ultimately successful in its attempt to introduce a predominantly Western model of public relations education found opposition from those who argued that Western models were the means to achieve "Third World" hegemony in communication by transferring media systems, philosophies, methods and content of education and professional ideologies.[19]

MIDDLE EAST 'WORLDVIEW' MIGHT BE DIFFERENT FROM THE WEST

A Middle East "worldview" might be considerably different from what is predominant in the West. In fact, Arab "worldview" is considerably different, albeit not incompatible.

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[16]Gordon Robison, *Arab Gulf States: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia & the United Arab Emirates--A Travel Survival Kit* (Hawthorn, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, 1993), 10.

[17]Ibid., 18 & 19.

[18]Although the book is written in Arabic with no English translation presently available, a text making these arguments is Dean Kruckeberg, Badran A. R. Badran, Muhammad I. Ayish, and Ali A. Awad, *Principles of Public Relations* (Al-Ain, United Arab Emirates: United Arab Emirates University Press, 1994).

[19]Badran A. R. Badran, "Public Relations in the United Arab Emirates: Public Perceptions and Academic Needs," Paper presented at the 44th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Sydney, Australia, July 11 through 15, 1994.

Nevertheless, research that examined select internal departments and public relations agencies reputed to be high-quality and professional in the United Arab Emirates suggested many similarities with "First World" public relations practice. That is, public relations firms--usually staffed by Europeans and Lebanese educated in the West--primarily used one-way asymmetric press agentry and public information models of public relations. They were involved mostly in product publicity and marketing support.[20] Their practice was greatly similar to that of their counterparts in the United States and Western Europe. However, the researcher contends that public relations departments in most of the government units most closely resembled a "two-way symmetrical" model or a "mixed-motive" model.

At face value and without reflection, it may appear unlikely a Middle East government unit would practice such symmetrical public relations. However, greater familiarity with Middle East culture and with Islam suggests much symmetrical public relations can occur. While the social system may be ultimately patriarchal and hierarchical, and while matters of religion are hardly open to deliberation, Middle East society also is tribal in nature. Throughout much of the Middle East, rulers and their governments are highly concerned about the welfare of their people. Furthermore, many of the basic tenets of Islam encourage symmetrical dialogue to manage conflict, to improve understanding and to build relationships with one another. Finally, there is a religious mandate to love and to take responsibility for one another.

CONCLUSION

Of course, many of the values of Middle East culture are non-Western. Press freedoms are greatly limited, certainly compared to those in the United States, as are latitudes in other areas of personal expression. But, in many if not most respects, nothing inherently precludes practice of a "symmetrical" model of public relations. Perhaps more importantly, nothing inherently precludes the Middle East's ethical practice of public relations, if not by "universal" standards, at least by Western "First World" standards.

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[20]Dean Kruckeberg, "A Preliminary Identification and Study of Public Relations Models and Their Ethical Implications in Select Internal Public Relations Departments and Public Relations Agencies in the United Arab Emirates," Paper presented at the national convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Atlanta, Georgia, Aug. 10, 1994.